

Committee on Resources

resources.committee@mail.house.gov

[Home](#) [Press Gallery](#) [Subcommittees](#) [Issues](#) [Legislation](#) [Hearing Archives](#)

Congressional Field Hearing on Forest Health – Monday October 27, 2003

Testimony – Steve Robinson

Nevada Division of Forestry

Mr. Chairman,

My name is Steve Robinson – I'm the Nevada State Forester and am here today to represent Governor Kenny Guinn's policy on Nevada's forest health crisis.

There is no question the Federal and State governments are at a crossroads – either we take action to reduce the dangerous fuels buildup in our forests and rangelands or ready our citizens for decades of enduring summers of choking air, reduced recreation lands, mass evacuation of populations threatened by wildfire, homes destroyed and human lives lost and the severe reduction of our sagebrush environment.

Here in Nevada 92% of our forests are currently composed of pinyon and/or juniper species. Forests in the state of Nevada have fluctuated dramatically in their composition and geographic position. Currently these forest types appear to be expanding, while other forest types, such as aspen, are decreasing. The impact of Pinyon-juniper expansion is also impacting the brush and grassland areas in the state. This is a direct result of the interruption of fire as a natural disturbance regime.

Insect caused mortality combined with other diseases and the interruption of normal fire cycles have resulted in overstocked and/or over mature forested stands. These stands, when faced with now over 13 years of drought are showing significant increases in mortality.

Consequently, these conditions lead to large, catastrophic wildfires which are devastating the natural ecosystems in Nevada and other western states.

From 1999 to 2001, over 2 million acres of federal land and 124,000 acres of state and private land have been surveyed by the US Forest Service and Nevada Division of Forestry, to determine forest health conditions and trends. This report is included in your packet. The effects of long term drought and increased insect activity has become extremely evident throughout Nevada.

Insect and disease caused tree mortality in Nevada has increased from under 50,000 trees in 1988 to over 250,000 trees in 1993. Unfortunately, forest mortality in Nevada is continuing to increase and, of the counties surveyed in 2001, almost 26,000 trees covering 12,000 acres have died from insect and disease outbreaks. In White Pine County alone over 14,000 trees totaling 5,000 acres have died from insect and disease outbreaks in just the year 2001.

This area, along with Elko County, have a Douglas –Fir tussock moth outbreak as well on over 4000 acres. Fir engraver beetle activity is heavy in the Ely, Nevada area, and the Mt. Pine beetle has caused tree mortality to increase from 11,000 trees in 1998 to over 43,000 in 2000 in the intermountain region.

Because the aerial survey could not fly the entire pinyon-juniper forest cover type in 2001, the extent of pinyon pine mortality is assumed much larger than the recorded coverage. This poses an increasing threat to populated areas in the urban interface.

The distribution of Nevada wildfires from 1981 through 2000 shows that the majority of the wildfire acreage occurs in Pinyon-Juniper and sagebrush communities. These areas are often thought of as second-class resources, but in fact are the key to the Great Basin environmental future.

From 1999 to 2001, almost 3,800 fires burned approximately 3.25 million acres in Nevada. At the same time, expanding development of rural/small towns in these Pinyon-Juniper woodlands is increasing dramatically.

These Nevada towns are surrounded by public lands. Allowing for greater flexibility in forest management of the Great Basin forests by the public land management agencies is the answer to treatment within the urban interface and across the landscape. We need every tool in the tool box to begin this effort which comprised millions of acres.

Conifer forests along the western edge of the state along the Sierra also continue to experience bark and engraver beetle epidemics. This epidemic began in the late 1980's in response to eight year drought and heavily stocked forest stands. These beetles killed over 1.2 million trees from 1985 through 2000.

Especially troubling is the cumulative, long-term cultural and natural resource threats and losses caused by the greater intensity and number of large wildland fires in recent years.

These fires threatened and took human life, killed livestock and destroyed structures, such as homes, fences, water developments, bridges, ranch buildings, and power lines. Clearly public policy must address this problem.

The toll on wildlife in Nevada has been catastrophic. Tremendous damage to biological resources and environmental quality caused by the extraordinary wildfire behavior shows no signs of abating.

§ At the end of August 1999 fire storms, the NDOW estimated habitat losses for some game species in the Pinyon-Juniper woodland and rangeland ecosystems:

§ 340,000 acres of deer winter range,

§ 305,000 acres of deer summer range,

§ 668,100 acres of pronghorn antelope range, and

§ 45,500 acres of bighorn sheep range were seriously impacted.

§ Estimated almost 350,000 acres sage grouse habitat burned

These catastrophic fires clear the way for invasion of non-native invasive and noxious weeds. Cheatgrass, a flammable nonnative annual grass, is just one of the invasive weeds taking hold the understory of shrub and pinyon/juniper communities, eventually forming monocultures.

Weeds such as white top, cheat grass, tamarisk, and Russian knapweed are only a few of the well know noxious and invasive weeds threatening our states natural resources.

This invasive and noxious weed crisis is one of the most aggressive threats to agriculture, wildlife and our public wildlands that Nevada has seen. Make no mistake, we are losing this battle.

In spite of these alarming trends, I want to assure you much activity has taken place by your state, local and federal agencies, especially since the 2001 Congressional Fire Plan legislation. There are several efforts in the State of Nevada to address and reverse these negative trends in forest and rangeland health.

Nevada State Plant Production nurseries and native Seedbank: Nevada Division of Forestry, Nevada Department of Agriculture, US Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management and others, have joined together to improve the current Nevada native plant materials program. The goals are to increase and improve the current native plant and Seedbank program to help meet the upcoming needs for native and adapted plant materials. These materials will enable agencies, counties, and individuals to have easier, more efficient and affordable access to native plant materials for restoration of streams, forests, agricultural lands and rangelands impacted by weeds, insect and disease, and disasters such as flood, fires and drought. Working groups between all public and state land management agencies is occurring.

Noxious and Invasive Weed Control: All branches of the Department of Natural Resources, and the Federal Land management agencies are working diligently with weed action groups, local governments and private individuals to put the stop to the increasing spread of these devastating weeds.

The Nevada Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension services have been the lead in developing Weed Action groups and Cooperative Weed Management areas throughout our state.

Biomass utilization: Efforts to reduce the fuels, thin the forest and remove dead trees from the forests have been inhibited by disposal or use of the remaining slash and wood. Small wood products industries are being explored as well as utilizing the wood chips and fuel for public buildings heating source.

Fuels For Schools, a program partnership between the City of Ely and Nevada Division of Forestry is beginning its first pilot project. This project is in the feasibility assessment stage at a local grade school and holds great promise.

Fuels Reduction efforts: In partnership with these federal agencies, the Nevada Division of Forestry through the National Fire Plan has issued over 300 grants to communities, individuals, organizations and volunteer fire departments for the reduction of fuels, fire safe planning and wildfire response.

Over 300 acres in Wilson Canyon and Mt. Charleston area are being treated in efforts to protect over 600 homes and private parcels. Multiple smaller towns in Northern Nevada are currently working on fire protection and fuels reductions in the interface including: Ely, Baker, Austin, Pioche, Manhattan, and Jarbidge just to name a few. Nevada Division of Forestry is also working with Glenbrook and Incline Village in Lake Tahoe and others across the Sierra front.

Nevada's forests, rangelands and agriculture are at risk. These resources face high risk of catastrophic fire and weed infestations which may not be reversible if we continue at our current rate of treatment and land management funding levels.

Decades of an accumulation of dense undergrowth and brush, along with drought conditions, insect infestation and disease and invasion by exotic species leave our state highly vulnerable to these environmentally destructive disasters. The long term effects of these threats to lives, property and economics is clear. We must support actions to expedite high-priority fuel-reduction and forest and rangeland restoration projects in our State and in our Nation.

Finally, on the subject of fire fatalities, and if I might, Mr. Chairman, I have served on the Board of Directors of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation for 10 years. Each year approximately 100 firefighters die in the line of duty.

This year, almost 30% of those fatalities are in wildland fire – and the numbers are increasing. Clearly, even with an increased emphasis on safety – the advent of larger, hotter, longer duration range and forest fires are killing an increasing number of young men and women. And I know, Congressman Gibbons has made much an effort to supply us with an air fleet more suitable for modern fire suppression. The fire service appreciates his efforts, sir.

But this issue of restoring forest health and reducing unplanned catastrophic fire is not just a debate among competing ideologies – it is one of life and death to firefighters and I would ask you to consider that in your deliberations.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you.

References:

Nevada Natural Resources Status Report – Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Boise Interagency Fire Center website

Western Great Basin Coordination Center website.

Insects and Disease in the Intermountain Region, 2001, S. Munson, USFS Entomologist.

Nevada Forest Health Highlights – 2001, USDS, USFS.

2001 Forest Insect and Disease Conditions in Nevada; USDA, USFS, Nevada Division of Forestry.